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ESSENCE OF DECISION IN MOSCOW
THE 1986 SHAM WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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On July 28 1986, during a major foreign policy speech in the Soviet Far Eastern city of Vladivostok, Mikhail Gorbachev announced that six Soviet regiments would be pulled out of Afghanistan. This was Gorbachev's first public move in the long and contentious struggle to leave Afghanistan. In October of 1986, amid considerable fanfare, the six regiments were indeed withdrawn. The problem, however, was that the only militarily-significant elements had been introduced into the country shortly after Gorbachev's speech, without any serious efforts to camouflage their arrival.

Western governments immediately denounced the "sham withdrawal" and the Soviets gained nothing from the maneuver. In fact, Gorbachev's credibility in the West suffered considerably from the episode. The timing was particularly damaging because it occurred on the eve of the Reykjavik Summit when Gorbachev was preparing to unveil a radical proposal for unprecedented cuts in nuclear arms. In retrospect, the incident is even harder to explain, since it turned out to be the first step in the genuine Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Western analysts who have studied the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan have been at a loss to explain this sham withdrawal.¹ Indeed, if we simply use Graham Allison's "rational actor" model, the episode is inexplicable. If, however, we combine it with Allison's other two models of "government politics" and "organizational process" we can construct a number of possible scenarios that could have created the sham.

As Allison points out, we know far too little about the inner workings of the Soviet system to pursue any of these models seriously.² This paper is merely a preliminary attempt to explore the issues, personalities and bureaucratic institutions and procedures that could have combined to produce this bizarre episode.

Our first task is to take a closer look at the setting and chronology of the episode itself.

¹ See, for example, Don Oberdorfer, "Afghanistan: The Soviet Decision to Pull Out," The Washington Post 17 April 1988:A1 and Michael Dobbs, "The Afghan Archive: Reversing Course," The Washington Post 16 November 1992:A1.

²Graham Allison, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, New York: Harper and Collins, 1971.

We will then consider three possible explanations:

- Gorbachev intended to follow through with the withdrawal but changed his mind;
- Gorbachev announced the withdrawal without sufficient support to carry it out;
- Gorbachev intended a genuine withdrawal, but his intentions were sabotaged by others.

Historians will not be able to determine which, if any, of these hypotheses are correct until Soviet archives are more fully opened and more of the participants have written their memoirs or at least spoken to scholars. The purpose of this paper is to use Allison's models to suggest new lines of inquiry.

CHRONOLOGY OF A DECEPTION

Gorbachev's first public statement about Afghanistan came almost a year after he became General Secretary, during his speech to the 27th Party Congress in February 1986. In this speech, he referred to Afghanistan as a "bleeding wound" -- a significant departure from traditional official rhetoric which sought to downplay Soviet involvement and casualties in Afghanistan.³ Another anomaly at the Congress was the fact that Afghan Communist Party leader Babrak Karmal was present, but not permitted to speak, the only Communist Party leader so snubbed. Western observers rightly surmised that he was on his way out.⁴ But analysts were divided on the significance of Karmal's replacement by Afghan Secret Police Chief Najibullah three months later. Some argued that Najib would be more responsive to the Kremlin's bidding, others that he would be more ruthless in pursuing the mujahidin.⁵ In retrospect, the former were correct.

In late July of 1986, Gorbachev travelled to Vladivostok, where he made a major speech outlining a new direction for Soviet-Asian policy. The speech was interpreted primarily as an

³According to former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, early drafts of Gorbachev's speech were even stronger and included mention of "the need to withdraw our forces from Afghanistan." The latter phrase, according to Shevardnadze, disappeared at some point during the clearance process. See Sarah Mendelson "Internal Battles and External Wars: Politics, Learning, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," World Politics 45 (April 1993):351.

⁴Mark Urban, War in Afghanistan, New York: St Martin's Press, 1990:190.

⁵Author's Interview: Wayne Limberg, Division Chief, Soviet Foreign Policy Division, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, Dec 9 1993.

olive branch to China, although, like many of Gorbachev's early pronouncements it seemed to have more new rhetoric than new substance. State Department analysts who studied the speech were struck by the placement of the Afghan portion near the end of the speech "almost as an afterthought."⁶

Although Gorbachev cited no specific number of troops to be withdrawn, he was quite specific about the units and the timing: "By the end of 1986, six regiments: one tank regiment, two motorized rifle regiments and three anti-aircraft regiments along with their established equipment and weapons will be returned from Afghanistan to the homeland."⁷ He also made a point of emphasizing that the withdrawal would be verifiable: "These units will return to the regions of their permanent deployment in the Soviet Union, and in such a way that all those for whom this may be of interest may easily be convinced of this."⁸ As Gorbachev was well aware, the question of Soviet adherence to arms control agreements was highly politicized in Washington, and a debate was raging over whether Soviet commitments could be trusted and verified. He should have realized, therefore, that the U.S. would be watching this withdrawal with eagle eyes and that it would serve as a litmus test for the sincerity of his "New Thinking."

For this reason, U.S. intelligence analysts were stunned to watch the Soviets simply march two new motorized rifle regiments into Afghanistan during the course of the summer and fall, along with a new set of tanks for the tank regiment, with no serious effort at camouflaging their arrival. "It was almost as if they were thumbing their noses at us," one recalled.⁹

The official withdrawal began in mid-October with bands, parades, and a large contingent of the world press flown to the Soviet-Afghan border to observe the festivities. U.S. Defense Secretary Weinberger, who was visiting China, immediately denounced the exercise as a "ruse"

⁶Author's Interview: Wayne Limberg.

⁷Mikhail Gorbachev, speech, cited in BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, July 29, 1986.

⁸Gorbachev, July 29 1986.

⁹Author's Interview: Wayne Limberg.

and a "shell game."¹⁰ The Chinese followed suit. In Washington, the director of DIA, General Leonard Peroots, held a detailed press briefing, where he reported that the motorized rifle regiments had been brought into Afghanistan in late August and the tanks in mid-September and early October. The anti-aircraft regiments had been in the country prior to Gorbachev's speech, Peroots said, but their withdrawal was of no military significance since the mujahidin had no air force.¹¹ Western governments and media generally accepted Peroots' arguments and denigrated the withdrawal.

Less than two weeks after the withdrawal was completed, Gorbachev convened a Politburo meeting which agreed to set a two-year deadline for Soviet troops to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹² And indeed, two years and three months later, the last Soviet soldiers left Afghanistan. The 1986 Politburo decision, however, was a secret one. In part because of the sham withdrawal, it took the Reagan Administration almost eighteen months to accept the fact that the Soviets were really on their way out, and to consider taking steps to support the process.

GORBACHEV CHANGES HIS MIND

The first scenario we want to consider is that Gorbachev genuinely intended to withdraw the six regiments when he made the announcement in late July, but that a change in the military and/or political situation soon thereafter made him change his mind. Part of the problem with this scenario is the timing: if Peroots' statement to the press was accurate, the first concrete evidence of the sham was visible in late August, only a month after Gorbachev's speech. If we allow a minimum of two weeks for planning and movement of the troops, it is clear that such a change of heart -- if it took place -- must have come almost immediately after the speech was delivered.

If we look at the military situation in Afghanistan during that period, however, there were

¹⁰Charles Aldinger, "U.S. Again Accuses Moscow of 'Sham' in Afghan Withdrawal." Reuters, October 31 1986.

¹¹James Gerstenzang, "Pentagon Intelligence Chief Calls Soviet Troop Pullout from Afghanistan a Sham," Los Angeles Times, 31 October 1986:5.

¹²Michael Dobbs, A1.

two developments that could have led to a change of heart on Gorbachev's part: the battle of Zhawar and the arrival of the Stingers.

Soon after Gorbachev became General Secretary, a new commander was named to the Afghan theater (the Soviet Southern Theater of Military Operations) -- General Mikhail Zaitsev.¹³ Western analysts quickly dubbed his strategy "Afghanization" -- a concerted effort to build up the Afghan army (DRA) to do the bulk of its own fighting. For a while this strategy seemed to show promise. The high-water point was reached at the April 1986 Battle of Zhawar, when a predominantly DRA force overran a major guerilla base on the Afghan-Pakistani border with heavy losses on both sides.¹⁴ The battle was heralded as a major breakthrough for the Afghan army and the beginning of a new era. As it turned out, however, the DRA forces were so decimated during the battle that the Afghan army was never again able to launch an operation of this size.

The Battle of Zhawar also saw the first use of sophisticated Blowpipe anti-aircraft missiles by the mujahidin. The small number of Blowpipes, and the more famous Stingers that began to arrive in the late summer of 1986, were too few at that stage to have a material impact on the military balance. But to the Soviet military they were a harbinger of trouble to come: the Red Army's already stretched forces would lose their main advantage of air supremacy.

It is at least theoretically possible that Gorbachev got approval for the partial withdrawal in late spring or early summer, at a time when the full cost of the Battle of Zhawar was not understood, and the impact of the arrival of anti-aircraft missiles not yet visible. In early August, however, the combination of these two factors could have convinced Gorbachev that the militarily-significant portions of the withdrawal should not be carried out.

Western reaction to the withdrawal announcement could also have contributed to a change of heart. Most Western governments downplayed the withdrawal as a token gesture, even before they realized it was a sham. Gorbachev may have felt that there was no point in going through with a genuine withdrawal and exposing the remaining troops to increased danger if he

¹³Urban p175.

¹⁴Urban p191-5.

would not get any international credit for it anyhow.

To pursue the thesis that Gorbachev originally intended to go through with the withdrawal, but then changed his mind, we would need more information on the timing of the two decisions, and also on Soviet perceptions of the military impact of the Battle of Zhawar and the Stingers. The hypothesis remains unsatisfactory in that it doesn't explain why no attempt was made to camouflage the deception.

If Gorbachev did indeed acquiesce to a reversal of his decision within the space of a month or less, it is likely that this change resulted as much from bureaucratic struggle in Moscow as from changes on the ground in Afghanistan. Thus the "government politics" model would probably shed more light on this scenario than the "rational actor." In the next section, we will look at some of the internal struggles that may well have shaped the withdrawal process.

GORBACHEV TAKES A GAMBLE

In this second scenario we need to consider the possibility that Gorbachev's primary concern in making the withdrawal announcement was not to score points with the U.S. and China, but rather, to signal to his domestic audience that he was serious about taking Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. Gorbachev may have calculated that the public announcement of a limited drawdown would start the ball rolling and raise pressure for real withdrawal, even if nothing of military significance were withdrawn.

Once Gorbachev decided to bring Soviet troops back from Afghanistan¹⁵ he had to engage in a two-step process: convincing as many of his colleagues and subordinates as possible that withdrawal was the correct course, and replacing those who were unconvinced. Afghanistan was only one of many arenas of conflict between reformers and hard-liners in 1986, and the battle-lines on other issues probably had an impact on the Afghan debate as well. In particular it seems logical to assume that many of the people who were resisting a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan would also be opposed to the ambitious arms control ideas that Gorbachev was

¹⁵According to Oberdorfer, Gorbachev said in a 1988 speech that his decision to bring Soviet troops home from Afghanistan was made as early as April 1985. This is supported by Dobbs' finding that the Politburo decision was made in November 1986. At the time, however, most Western analysts believed that Gorbachev's decision was made much later, in 1986 or even 1987.

developing during the same period.

The struggle was not a simple battle between military and civilians as it is sometimes painted, because the military leadership -- like the Party -- was bitterly split over Afghan policy.¹⁶ Like the American Army in Vietnam, the Soviet military felt humiliated at not being able to defeat a third world foe, unappreciated at home, and resentful of political leaders dictating military strategy. In particular, they chafed under the numerical restrictions imposed by the political leadership: no matter how well or badly the war was going, the Politburo steadfastly refused to raise the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan far beyond the 100,000 level. By 1985, nobody in the Soviet military felt the situation was moving in the right direction. Some argued that if given sufficient tools, the Red Army could do the job. But others believed that Afghanistan could never be pacified by military means, in part because of mujahidin access to weapons and safe havens on the Pakistani and Iranian sides of the border.

Because of the closed nature of the Soviet system, the policy struggle over Afghanistan was carried on, for the most part, behind the scenes. One possible hypothesis is that Gorbachev put the withdrawal announcement in his Vladivostok speech without full support from his colleagues, gambling that he could get the backing to carry out the withdrawal when the time came. Certainly, Gorbachev made numerous gambles during his six years as General Secretary, many with even higher stakes than this one. The scenario would only make sense if Gorbachev felt he had considerable support for withdrawal in the Politburo, but was unable to get a consensus in time for his speech. Such an assumption does not seem entirely unreasonable, however, given the fact that by mid-November he was able to get the Politburo to approve the two-year withdrawal deadline.

Without detailed information about the bureaucratic processes in high-level Soviet decision-making, we cannot assess the possibility of Gorbachev taking such a gamble. Who would have cleared Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech? Whose approval would have been

¹⁶According to Mendelson, Georgii Arbatov claims that Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov supported the war, while Armed Forces Chief of Staff Nikolay Ogarkov, his deputy, Sergey Akhromeyev, and Chief of Soviet Land Forces Valentin Varennikov all favored withdrawal. Gorbachev's close associate, Alexandr Yakovlev, however, claims that both Akhromeyev and Varennikov resisted withdrawal.

necessary for a genuine withdrawal of six regiments? Were some of the key individuals out of town at the time either decision was made?¹⁷

1986 was a time of considerable bureaucratic turmoil in the Soviet Union, as Gorbachev began to shake up the old system on a number of fronts simultaneously. A Western scholar who has studied Soviet decision-making on Afghanistan has written that Gorbachev consulted with a much wider array of official and unofficial advisors than his predecessors did and used a variety of informal channels.¹⁸ Could some changes in bureaucratic processes have made it possible for Gorbachev to make a major foreign policy address that was not fully cleared by his colleagues?

We noted in the previous section that the Soviet military may have believed that the military situation was deteriorating during the summer of 1986. It is possible that Gorbachev got approval for the withdrawal when the proposal was first made but that some of the military got cold feet by August. Even those in the military who favored withdrawal probably favored a two-step strategy of first pulling troops back from the most exposed locations and then moving them out at a relatively rapid clip, rather than simply lowering troop levels a few regiments at a time, and leaving the remaining troops vulnerable.¹⁹ It seems likely that if the issue became cast as a question of leaving military units unprotected in a worsening military situation, opponents of the withdrawal would be on much stronger ground.

In order to pursue this thesis, we would need more information on the views held by different policy-makers and institutions, and also on the bureaucratic routines by which decisions were arrived at and confirmed. Both the "government politics" model and the "organizational process" would contribute to our understanding of the plausibility of this scenario.

¹⁷A perennially baffling aspect of Soviet politics is the extent to which opponents of the General Secretary were able to make use of the latter's absences from Moscow to reverse his decisions or mount plots against him. Examples of this phenomenon range from Khrushchev's ouster to Ligachev's Nina Andreyevna letter to the failed coup against Gorbachev. They suggest that physical presence was crucial in Politburo meetings, and that proxy voting was not an accepted practice.

¹⁸Mendelson p342-3.

¹⁹Indeed, this is the strategy the Soviets followed when the withdrawal began in earnest in 1988. See Urban, p237-276.

Like the previous scenario, the hypothesis that Gorbachev failed to get sufficient support to carry out the withdrawal does not explain why no attempt was made to camouflage the deception. It also opens up another puzzle. How was Gorbachev able to get the Politburo to set a deadline for the total troop withdrawal in November if he couldn't get support for even a token withdrawal in August?

GORBACHEV GETS TRICKED

The final scenario is that Gorbachev intended a genuine withdrawal, but that the military -- either acting on their own, or with support from Gorbachev's political opponents -- fooled him and moved new troops in before they moved the old ones out. This scenario has an advantage over the other two, in offering a plausible explanation for the fact that no attempt was made to camouflage the deception. The perpetrators wanted the world to find out, because their intention was to embarrass and discredit Gorbachev.

This possibility was raised at the time, but for the most part, it was dismissed by Western Sovietologists, who argued that the Soviet military has traditionally been rigidly subordinated to the Party and would not have been capable of this kind of defiance. The military, of course, played a substantial role in high-level decision-making, but there are no known examples, at least in the Brezhnev era and beyond, of the military openly defying a Politburo decision of this kind.

The question arises whether some of the conservatives in the political leadership could have allied themselves with elements in the military to undertake this maneuver and discredit Gorbachev. If this were the case, however, one would expect Gorbachev to have exacted retribution when he realized what happened. It is possible that the retribution was delayed, or simply masked to outsiders by the large-scale personnel shifts that Gorbachev and his allies undertook to rid themselves of the old-guard and bring "perestroyka" to fruition. But if the entire episode was simply a straightforward act of resistance by Gorbachev's opponents, it is surprising that he and his supporters never raised it publically in the intervening years. A more plausible explanation, drawing on the "organizational process" model, is that Gorbachev's opponents were somehow able to manipulate the rotational routines of the Soviet Army in order to justify bringing the new troops in before they took the old ones out. Clearly there must have been substantial military input into the original decision on a partial withdrawal, since the civilians,

left to themselves, would not have been likely to mark that particular combination of units for withdrawal. To pursue this thesis, we would need detailed knowledge of the standard operating procedures of the Soviet Army. But the mere fact that eight years into the war, the Soviets maintained air defense units against an enemy that had no air force and no hope of acquiring one, makes it clear how routine-bound the Soviet Army was.

SOMEBODY BLEW IT

All three of the scenarios we examined have some elements of plausibility but none is entirely satisfactory. In part, this is due to our ignorance. Even after the demise of the USSR, much basic information about the workings of the Soviet system is simply unavailable.

One other factor that should be considered is the likelihood that part of the puzzle resulted from blunders, miscalculations and miscommunication. This is an element we are all familiar with from our own bureaucratic experience, but often overlook when we analyze the behavior of others. The failure to camouflage the introduction of new troops, for instance, could have resulted from miscues and misplanning, rather than political maneuvers. The USSR, in fact, was particularly vulnerable to bureaucratic blunders because the political system rewarded obedience rather than questioning of authority, and there was no independent press to act as a watchdog. This is one more reason why we are unlikely to ever find a simple explanation for the riddle of the sham withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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